

Georgia

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each other during the game.”

The opener, which will be played before what figures to be a very pro-Georgia crowd at 75,000-seat Mercedes-Benz Stadium, will be an early indicator of where both programs stand.

Georgia is looking to make another run at the national championship despite losing a record 15 players in the NFL draft — five of them first-rounders off a stellar defensive unit that carried the Bulldogs to their first title since 1980.

With the Pac-12 in turmoil and speculation that they could soon be headed to the Big Ten, the Ducks hope to build on the success they had during Mario Cristobal's four-year tenure, which featured a pair of conference championships.

When Cristobal left for Miami, the Ducks quickly turned to Georgia's co-defensive coordinator.

They made a good choice, according to Smart, whose relationship with Lanning goes back to 2015 when both were on Nick Saban's staff at Alabama.

“I had a great relationship with Dan when he worked at University of Alabama, and had a lot of respect for how he went about doing his job,” Smart said. “He didn't try to be somebody he wasn't. He didn't try to impress people. He just worked and he grinded, and he really did a good job of just doing what you asked him to do. I always thought he would be successful.”

When Smart left for his first head coaching job at Georgia in 2016, he kept an eye on Lanning. The Bulldogs had an opening on their staff two years later and hired him as the outside linebackers coach.

“It ended up being a no-brainer for us to bring Danny in because I knew the value he had,” Smart recalled.

Lanning was promoted to co-defensive coordinator a year later after Mel Tucker left for Colorado, receiving much of the credit for building one of college football's greatest defenses.

“I knew he was going to do a great job,” Smart said.

Lanning's co-coordinator, Glenn Schumann, is still at Georgia. He'll continue in that role along with former Florida and South Carolina head coach Will Muschamp.

Smart said it's been a smooth transition, especially because Muschamp was already on the staff as special teams coordinator.

“Dan would be the first to tell you he never would've had the success he had here if not for Glenn Schumann,” Smart said. “I felt comfortable Glenn would be able to take it over along with Will. It's great when we have two guys that know the system and two guys that can share that responsibility.”

Before he even coached a game, Lanning had to deal with tragedy within his new team.

Tight end and social media star Spencer Webb died last month in an accidental fall at a popular swimming lake. The Ducks will wear a special decal on their helmets this season featuring Webb's No. 4 inside a spider web.

“Our team has a void,” Lanning said. “It's something you certainly cannot replace. I've talked to our players about that moment and Spencer, how on your tombstone there's a day you were born and a day when you passed, but what made Spencer special was how he lived that dash in between those two numbers.”

In addition to an entirely new coaching staff, the Ducks have a bunch of newcomers on their roster. They brought in 21 players through the transfer portal, 15 of them from Power Five schools.

Lanning has plenty of familiarity with Georgia's defense.

Of course, that works both ways.

“Kirby Smart is not going to play a single snap on Saturday, and neither is Dan Lanning,” the Oregon coach said. “It doesn't really matter what I know. It's what my players know and how well they can execute.”

Rattler ready for Gamecock debut

By **PETE IACOBELLI**
AP Sports Writer

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Former Oklahoma quarterback Spencer Rattler is anxious and excited, confident and poised — and more than ready to take the field with his new team at South Carolina.

After helping the Sooners win the Big 12 Conference title in 2020, Rattler lost his starting job midway through last season and became one of the top passers seeking a new home last December.

Rattler found it with the Gamecocks and can't wait for Saturday night's home opener against Georgia State.

“I'll be live for the first time in a long time,” said Rattler, who started Oklahoma's first six games before Caleb Williams took over. “But I'm ready for that, ready to get hit once or twice.”

Rattler, who's thrown for 4,514 yards, 39 touchdowns and 12 interceptions the past two years, has said he didn't really understand the switch. He had won 13 straight as a starter when Williams got the call with Oklahoma trailing rival Texas.

He's worked hard to clear his head and regain the style that had him as one of the leading Heisman Trophy contenders before last season.

“I'm not thinking about last season,” Rattler said.

Rattler entered South Carolina last January and stayed low-key in bonding with teammates and learning

to run the attack led by offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Marcus Satterfield.

Rattler took pages of notes, Satterfield said, and showed a willingness to be coached, despite his past success. And when Rattler is in the huddle, there's a confidence that's unlike other quarterbacks.

“He brings our entire team confidence,” Satterfield said. “He's there to compete and give our team a chance to win.”

Rattler believes he's prepared well in the offseason to be the best he can be. He's played and excelled in front of crazy, loud crowds before and can't wait to see how his new SEC team's fans measure up.

As far as facing Georgia State, Rattler hasn't mapped out specific individual goals for a successful debut. “We just want to go out there and execute every drive, every play,” he said. “That's what it comes down to. For us, we just want to focus on us.”

Rattler is part of strong group of experienced transfers for the Gamecocks, who are looking to improve on last year's 7-6 mark in coach Shane Beamer's first season: Running back Christian Beal-Smith, who ran for 1,336 yards and 12 touchdowns at Wake Forest the previous two years; Rattler's former Oklahoma teammate tight end Austin Stogner also transferred to the Gamecocks; and South Carolina's new receivers include Antwane “Juice” Wells Jr., who broke James Madison marks with 1,250 receiving yards and 15 TDs.

Wells was impressed by Rattler's easy demeanor and regular-guy approach to the season. “He's been consistent from day one,” Wells said of his new QB1. “He's kept his head down and just kept getting better and better.”

Georgia State coach Shawn Elliott knows his defense will have its hands full trying to slow down Rattler.

South Carolina needed four starting quarterbacks, including grad assistant Zeb Noland, last year due to injuries and transfers. Having consistency behind center with Rattler should bolster the offense.

“Their quarterback game is going to be a little more enhanced,” said Elliott, who spent 2010 through 2015 at South Carolina as offensive line coach and interim head coach midway through that final season after Steve Spurrier's abrupt departure.

“I think he's a quarterback who can make all the throws across the field,” Elliott continued. “So they'll probably take a little more opportunity to go down the field.”

Rattler's not saying much about South Carolina's game plan. He's just counting the days until he's back in control of a Power Five offense.

“Running out that tunnel with team, coaches, everyone,” Rattler said. “Hopefully, get that anxiety out of the way, not anxious, just fun, ready-to-go vibes. It's going to be fun.”

AFC West: tough division with talented group of QBs

By **ARNIE STAPLETON**
AP Pro Football Writer

DENVER (AP) — The AFC West no longer looks like such a cakewalk for the Kansas City Chiefs now that Tyreek Hill is dashing past defenders in Miami.

Not only did the Chiefs shockingly send Patrick Mahomes' top receiver to the Dolphins for a fistful of draft picks, but their rivals all made major moves in hopes of ending Kansas City's divisional dominance.

— The Chargers invested more than \$70 million on defensive free agents as they surround QB Justin Herbert with a better roster. They acquired LB Khalil Mack and ex-Patriots CB J.C. Jackson, who had an NFL-high 25 interceptions over the past four seasons. They also made Derwin James the league's highest-paid safety with a four-year, \$76.5 million deal.

— The Raiders hired Josh McDaniels as coach to replace interim Rich Bisaccia, who helped lead them to the playoffs for just the second time in 19 years. They also acquired star DE Chandler Jones and traded for star WR Davante Adams, who left Aaron Rodgers to reignite his college connection with Derek Carr, his teammate at Fresno State.

— The Broncos changed head coaches, starting quarterbacks and even owners. Rob Walton paid a global sports record \$4.65 billion for the franchise and second-year GM George Paton replaced Vic Fangio with

rookie head coach Nathaniel Hackett before trading five picks and three players to Seattle for Russell Wilson, their sixth opening day starter in six years.

With the Broncos finally solving their quagmire at quarterback, the AFC West now has perhaps the best group of QBs of any division in the league.

“There's a lot to love there in that division,” veteran sportscaster Joe Buck said. “It's easily the best division with easily the best quarterback play.”

It should be more competitive in 2022, too, as the Chargers, Broncos and Raiders try to snap Kansas City's six-year reign atop the division.

The Broncos haven't won the West since 2015. The previous time the Chargers won it was in 2009, and the Raiders' most recent crown came way back in 2002.

Over hill?

The Chiefs can't replace Hill's explosive speed, but they did provide Mahomes with plenty of new playmakers to complement TE Travis Kelce. They signed JuJu Smith-Schuster away from Pittsburgh and Marquez Valdes-Scantling away from Green Bay and used a second-round pick on Skyy Moore of Western Michigan.

“We're going to be different,” Mahomes said, “but I think we'll still be able to go out there and have a ton of success.”

Maybe, but it's not going

to be easy for the Chiefs to host a fifth consecutive AFC championship game. Aside from playing in the toughest division in football, where all four teams have legitimate playoff aspirations, the Chiefs also face the AFC South and NFC West along with the Bills, Buccaneers and Bengals.

Fully charged

Nobody has had more passing yards, completions and TD throws in his first two years in the NFL than Herbert, and he could take a big leap in production this season now that he's grown more comfortable in the Chargers offense.

“He's just a lot looser than usual. He's just a lot more comfortable. When you come in year one, kind of shy, don't want to talk a lot,” wide receiver Mike Williams said. “But now, he's taken control and been himself.”

The Chargers' significant defensive upgrades can only help Herbert's burgeoning confidence.

“I'm really excited for this team. I think we are miles ahead of where we were at this point last year,” said Herbert, who threw for a franchise-record 5,014 yards and had nine 300-yard passing games last season.

Bucking Broncos

Wilson is the Broncos' 11th starting quarterback since Peyton Manning retired, and the new transplant has huddled aplenty with the Hall of Famer who still lives in

Denver and was a frequent visitor at training camp.

“We've been talking a lot,” Wilson said. “Since I've gotten here, he's kind of taken me under his wing in a beautiful way. (Peyton's wife) Ashley (Manning) has taken ‘Ci’ (Ciara) under her wing in helping with thoughts, schools, this, that and where to eat.”

“The thing that Peyton and I both love is football. We can spend all day watching football together,” Wilson added. “It's fun to be able to be around arguably the world's greatest who has ever played the game at that position.”

And one who's been through what Wilson is about to experience.

Raiders redux

McDaniels gets his second chance as a head coach in the same division where he flamed out in less than two seasons with the Broncos more than a decade ago.

“I feel like I've learned a lot,” said McDaniels. “I feel like it's slowed down for me for sure.”

A notoriously creative play-caller, McDaniels gets to direct an offense that features an established QB and one of the game's best pass-catching trios. Adams has averaged 108 catches since 2018, TE Darren Waller is one of the best at his position and slot WR Hunter Renfrow had 103 receptions for 1,038 yards last season.

Watson leaves Browns as NFL suspension begins

By **TOM WITHERS**
AP Sports Writer

BEREA, Ohio — At the same time his teammates began practicing, Deshaun Watson headed off in another direction.

Cleveland's starting quarterback began serving his lengthy NFL suspension for alleged sexual misconduct on Tuesday, a punishment that will keep Watson away from the Browns until Oct. 10.

Watson was placed on the reserve/suspended by commissioner list shortly before

practice started as the Browns finalized their initial 53-man roster on cut-down day. Wearing a baseball cap, Watson emerged from the team's facility a little after 3 p.m. EDT, got in his car and drove away.

He had been required to leave by 4 p.m. in accordance with the suspension he agreed to in an Aug. 18 settlement with the league.

A three-time Pro Bowler, Watson agreed to sit out 11 games, pay a \$5 million fine and undergo mandatory treatment and counseling before he can rejoin the

Browns. As long as he meets the requirements of the NFL settlement, he'll be eligible to play in Week 13 — on the road against the Houston Texans.

The 26-year-old was accused of sexual assault and harassment by two dozen women during massage therapy sessions when he played for the Texans. He has settled 23 of 24 civil lawsuits filed by the women.

During the suspension, Watson can't have contact with Browns personnel.

Coach Kevin Stefanski

met with Watson before the QB's departure. While not providing specifics of their conversation, Stefanski said he is confident Watson will make the time away productive.

“I think it's a great opportunity for him right now while he is away from this building to go work on football, work on himself and work on a bunch of different things,” Stefanski said.

Stefanski would not comment on whether Watson will stay in the Cleveland area during the ban.